

**Projects and Peasants:
Russia's Eighteenth Century**

**An Inaugural Lecture
delivered at
University College London
on 14th March 2000 by**

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SSEES Occasional Papers No. 44

ISBN: 0-903425-51-3

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Internet: <http://www.ssees.ac.uk/public.htm>

Printed in Great Britain by Quorn Selective Repro Limited, Queens Road, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 1HH

Projects and Peasants: Russia's Eighteenth Century

How should we think of the eighteenth century in Europe? For those preoccupied with historical discontinuity and change, it is the prelude to the French Revolution, a great caesura which cuts us off irrevocably from the preceding *ancien régime*. Histories of the period written on this principle often stop in 1789. The British suffered no such disjuncture: they have been aware on the contrary of continuity, and the growth of institutional stability and the expansion of Empire: what we lost in America we regained in Canada, India and Australia. British historians tend to think in terms of a 'long' eighteenth century, from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 to the Reform Act of 1832. The same perspective attracts historians of Russia: her 'long eighteenth century' lasts from the accession in 1682 of Peter the Great, under whom she exploded into Europe as a new Empire and Great Power, until the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, disastrous and triumphant, and the Decembrist uprising of 1825.

But if one moves away from the political dimension, there are many other eighteenth centuries. There is for instance the self-conscious age of elegance, beginning with Restoration London and Louis XIV: an age of social manners which opposed a unique theatricality in the public life of Versailles or Bath to the easy conviviality of the London coffee house. Russia had her share in this age too. The Muscovite elite of Peter's Russia had consciously to reinvent themselves on the stage of public life; they were compelled to adopt new ways of being, in effect to become European foreigners, in dress, deportment, education, speech and official behaviour, a transformation which they managed over the century with extraordinary success. Another eighteenth century is the age of sensibility, from Samuel Richardson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, through Sterne and the German 'Storm and Stress', up to Jane Austen in the early nineteenth century, who in Russia were joined by such as Alexander Radishchev and Nikolai Karamzin. But above all, I suppose, this is the age of reason, the Age of Enlightenment, the philosophical century: a time of intellectual ferment against a background of rationalistic concern to define and recreate the temporal world. As Alexander Pope famously enjoined his readers, in this age the 'proper study of Mankind is Man', not God.¹ And with the age of reason came the age of optimism: despite Voltaire's caricature in *Candide*, it did seem to many that all was for the best in an infinitely improvable world, or at least could be so. Civil society,

¹ A. Pope, *Essay on Man*, II, 2.

civilised society, was within reach. Advances in knowledge through rational enquiry and discovery suggested that Man could master nature, both terrestrial and human: human reason and natural law held the key to social advance, to virtue, and to human perfection. But if the power of reason and the order of the old world would in fact not answer, as Rousseau was to proclaim, then one might hope to find perfection in the new: the brave new continents discovered by the great eighteenth-century voyages of exploration — whether of James Cook in the Pacific or of Gerhard Friedrich Müller and others in Siberia — were matched towards the end of the century by elite European society's rediscovery of the common people: the Noble Savage, whether in a Pacific isle or a Scottish hut, could redeem the corruptions of established urban life.

In this context there flourished the figure of the 'projector' or 'project-maker'. 'Projects' and 'projectors' were a characteristic phenomenon of Enlightenment Europe; in fact they foreshadowed it and had become an object of contemporary public debate already in the seventeenth century. Plays with the title *The Projector[s]* were a sure sign that projectors were a recognisable social type, from London in 1665 to Turin in 1809.² Projectors represented the rational entrepreneurial spirit of the age, but also its capacity for untested and untestable visionary undertakings. Samuel Johnson in his great *Dictionary* of 1755 gave two definitions of this social type: a neutral, general one, '[some]one who forms schemes and designs', and a pejorative one: 'one who forms wild impracticable schemes'.³ By the mid-eighteenth century when Johnson wrote, the ambivalent reputation of projectors was soundly established. Their detractors denounced them as charlatans, out to enrich themselves at the public's expense by proclaiming wonderful plans or inventions. Alternatively they appeared as impractical dreamers who seized on some plausible or fantastic idea without considering its feasibility or understanding the difficulties it presented. The German scholar August Ludwig Schlözer, who had run up against projectors when he worked in Sweden, before moving on to Russia in the 1760s, remarked that all 'projectors by profession' look fixedly at one point, which they may well correctly grasp, but that they remain, as he said, 'blind to all disadvantages and difficulties which lie to left and right'.⁴ Adam Smith in the *Wealth of Nations* (1776) supported the view of projectors as cheats or speculators: he distinguished between the productive work of what he called 'undertakers', not morticians or funeral directors but careful and responsible entrepreneurs, and the profligacy and irresponsibility (as he saw it) of projectors who devise 'expensive and uncertain projects [...] which bring bankruptcy upon the greater part of the people who engage in them'.⁵ But the mentality of the projector, which

² *The Projector*. A Comedy, by J. Wilson. London, 1665; *The Projectors*. A Comedy [by W. Hunt], London, 1737; [Alberto Nota], *Il Progettista [The Projector]: commedia*, in: *Teatro inedito, in continuazione del Teatro scelto* [ed. R. Castellani], Livorno, 1816 (first performed Turin 1809).

³ *A Dictionary of the English Language* [...]. By Samuel Johnson, AM. In two volumes. London, 1755, facsimile edn, London, 1983, s.v. 'project', 'projector'.

⁴ A. L. Schlözers öffentliches und Privatleben von ihm selbst beschrieben. *Erstes Fragment*. Göttingen, 1802, pp. 91, 146-47. The difference between a great theoretician like Montesquieu and a projector, as Schlözer described it, lay between an organic, long-term and a mechanistic, short-term approach: A. L. Schlözer, *Von der Unschädlichkeit der Pocken in Russland und von Russlands Bevölkerung überhaupt*, Göttingen-Gotha, 1768, pp. 39-40 & n.11.

⁵ Quoted by E. Pesciarelli, 'Smith, Bentham, and the development of contrasting ideas on entrepreneurship', *History of Political Economy* 21: 3 (1989), 521-36 (524). The meaning of the English term 'projector' seems to have evolved further in the nineteenth century, and

relied upon the mechanical application of rationally-derived plans, was typically in tune with the optimism of activist Enlightenment rationalism. And it was an international phenomenon. The great South Sea Bubble in England paralleled John Law's daring and disastrous financial constructions in France.

In an essay in his journal *The Adventurer* no. 99 (1753), Samuel Johnson addressed himself at length to this topical subject. He talked first about what he saw as the great projectors of history. He noted that success in great undertakings brings men the glory of heroes, while those who fail tend to attract the reputation of fools or villains. For example, Caesar and Catiline had 'both formed the same project' of seizing power by subverting the Roman commonwealth. Catiline was killed, but Caesar triumphed: and ever since, Catiline's name has been a by-word for treachery, whereas Caesar's became a glorious title to which rulers aspire. Then Johnson turned to other imperial project-makers of this kind, and in his own eighteenth century to the opposing leaders of the Great Northern War, Charles XII and Peter the Great:

The last royal projectors with whom the world has been troubled, were Charles of Sweden and the Czar of Muscovy. Charles, if any judgment may be formed of his designs by his measures and his enquiries, had purposed first to dethrone the Czar, then to lead his army through pathless deserts into China, thence to make his way by the sword through the whole circuit of Asia, and by the conquest of Turkey to unite Sweden with his new dominions: but this mighty project was crushed at Pultowa, and Charles has since been considered as a madman by those powers, who sent their ambassadors to solicit his friendship, and their generals "to learn under him the art of war".

The Czar found employment sufficient in his own dominions, and amused himself in digging canals, and building cities; murdering his subjects with insufferable fatigues, and transplanting nations from one corner of his dominions to another, without regretting the thousands that perished on the way: but he attained his end, he made his people formidable, and is numbered by fame among the Demi-gods.

Johnson, as his tone suggests, was far from praising what he called 'the sanguinary projects of heroes and conquerors': rather he wished 'Caesar and Catiline, [...] Charles and Peter, huddled together in obscurity or detestation'.⁶ On the other hand, he continued, some projectors are of a different, more admirable sort:

there is another species of projectors, to whom I would willingly conciliate mankind: whose ends are generally laudable, and whose labours are innocent: who are searching out new powers of nature, or contriving new works of art; [so,

gradually to have lost its pejorative sense: cp. for instance G. H. Lewis, *The Liabilities incurred by the Projectors, Managers and Shareholders of Railway and other Joint Stock Companies considered [...]*, London, 1845; G. Scott, *Remarks on the projected Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Protestant Church in Ireland; and on their projectors. A Sermon [...]*, Belfast, 1868.

⁶ Samuel Johnson: *The Idler and The Adventurer*. Ed W. J. Bate et al., New Haven-London, 1963 (Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, vol. 11), pp. 429-35 (430-33)

intelligent and virtuous citizens; but these men, he went on] are yet persecuted with incessant obloquy, [men] whom the universal contempt with which they are treated, often debars from that success which their industry should obtain, if it were permitted to act without opposition.

Nevertheless, Johnson held that the role of such 'peaceable projectors' in the advancement of society was crucial:

That the attempts of such men will often miscarry, we may reasonably expect; yet from such men, and such only, are we to hope for the cultivation of those parts of nature which lie yet waste, and the invention of those arts which are yet wanting to the felicity of life. If they are [...] universally discouraged, art and discovery can make no advances. [...] it is therefore just [Johnson concluded] to encourage those, who endeavour to enlarge the power of art, since they often succeed beyond expectation; and when they fail, may sometimes benefit the world even by their miscarriages.⁷

It was not for nothing that Johnson took Peter I as a prime example of the breed of projector. Russia at the time had not only been catapulted into prominence by Peter's ruthless success in the Great Northern War, but as an underdeveloped country was seen by many as perfect ground for the elaboration and carrying out of projects. In the great contemporary debates about Peter, Johnson's negative view of him can be balanced by positive appreciations.⁸ Voltaire's immensely influential accounts of Charles and Peter counterposed the Russian monarch's creative rule to the destructive militarism of the Swede. Earlier in the century Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, one of the European celebrities to whom Peter turned for consultation and advice, viewed Russia as an ideal forcing ground for the advancement of knowledge. Leibniz had made it his life's work, he wrote in 1712, to strive

for the glory of God through the increase of the sciences, which best demonstrate the divine power, wisdom and goodness [...] I am always ready to turn my mind to that great goal, and I have only searched for a great prince who would have the same purpose.

Russia, thought Leibniz, should draw from both West and East. He wrote to Peter:

It seems to be the design of Providence, that science should travel the circle of the earth and now arrive in Scythia; and that Your Majesty is made the instrument [of Providence] in this case, since you can take the best on one hand from Europe, on the other from China and improve on both through good arrangements [...]; broadly speaking in your Empire everything to do with the pursuit of

⁷ Ibid., 433-35

⁸ C. H. Wilberger, *Voltaire's Russia: Window on the East*, Oxford, 1976 (Studies on Voltaire and the 18th Century, CLXIV), chaps VII & VIII; G. Goggi, 'The Philosophes and the Debate over Russian Civilisation', in M. di Salvo & L. Hughes, eds, *A Window on Russia. Papers from the Vth International Conference of the S.G.E.-C.R., Gargnano 1994*, [Rome], 1996, pp. 299-306; L. Richter, *Leibniz und sein Russlandbild*, Berlin, 1946.

knowledge [*die Studien*] is [...] as it were a blank sheet of paper, and so countless errors can be avoided which have gradually and imperceptibly crept in in Europe.⁹

Leibniz's views were cosmopolitan; they identified the working of the divine with the extension of human understanding. They were typical of the early Enlightenment. His picture of Russia as a blank sheet, *tabula rasa*, was evidently shared by Peter, who was quite ready in addition to erase any inconvenient residual old words or phrases which happened to remain on the blank paper. Both Peter and Leibniz believed in rationalist prescription as a universally applicable tool for change in Russia. The 'well-ordered police state' or *reguliarnoe gosudarstvo* was a place ordered by rational command and calculation. The classic Petrine domestic 'project' was St Petersburg, created by autocratic fiat, built on an unpromising site, against great odds and at huge cost, a visionary undertaking based on rationalistic *a priori* thinking and planning¹⁰, and on foreign models. In the larger dimension Peter's whole reign, as Samuel Johnson correctly saw, was a vast project driven by *raison d'état*, by Peter's private obsessions¹¹ and predilections, and by an ideal vision of a new order.¹²

The utopian tendency of Peter's vision is underlined by the descriptive name he chose for his new creation of St Petersburg. He called it his 'paradise';¹³ and during the century a whole discourse developed, what has correctly been called a Paradise Myth,¹⁴ deploying both biblical and especially Classical imagery, to justify the Petrine creation, the emergence of Petrine Russia 'from darkness into light' as apologists put it, and to celebrate the glory of Peter's Imperial successors. Subsequent Russian rulers and statesmen shared the Petrine vision and Petrine project to a greater or lesser extent. The Petrine inheritance was cast in mythical terms, and was honoured throughout the eighteenth century in rhetoric even when not in observance. Peter's legacy of projects and visionary enterprises was taken up again especially by Catherine II. With her accession in 1762, according to Schlözer, there began the golden age for projectors in Russia:¹⁵ Catherine herself was in fact to caricature the type a few years later in her play

⁹ Quoted by Richter, pp. 16-21; further on Leibniz and Russia see Mechthild Keller, 'Wegbereiter der Aufklärung: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz' Wirken für Peter den Grossen und sein Reich', in: *Russen und Russland aus deutscher Sicht, 9-17 Jahrhundert*, ed. M. Keller et al., Munich, 2nd edn 1988, pp.391-413.

¹⁰ Peter had previously planned a new city at Azov on the Sea of Azov. R. E. Jones, 'Why St. Petersburg?', in: L. A. J. Hughes, ed., *Peter the Great and the West. New Perspectives*, London, 2000, pp. 189-205.

¹¹ Another aspect of Peter's obsessions, one which also involved the creation of alternative realities, is investigated by Lindsey Hughes in her Inaugural Lecture, *Playing Games. The Alternative History of Peter the Great*, School of Slavonic & E. European Studies, University College London, 2000 (SSEES Occasional Papers no. 41).

¹² Modern writers have also talked in these terms, referring for example to Peter's 'project of Europeanisation': though this implies something both less schematic and more positive than most eighteenth-century usage. Cf. M. Raeff, 'At the Origins of a Russian National Self-Consciousness. Eighteenth-Century Roots and Napoleonic Wars', in: Raeff, *Political Ideas and Institutions in Imperial Russia*, Boulder-San Francisco-Oxford, 1994, pp. 65-75 (67, 69).

¹³ He used the Western form *paradis*, not the Slavonic *rai*.

¹⁴ Stephen L. Baehr, *The Paradise Myth in Eighteenth-Century Russia*, Stanford, 1991; see also L. A. J. Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great*, London, 1998, p. 214.

¹⁵ A. L. Schlözers *öffentliches und Privatleben*, p. 91. Cp. A. Stroeve, *Les aventuriers des Lumières*, Paris, 1997, pp. 5, 217-18.

The Name-Day of Mrs Vorchalkina (1772).¹⁶ Catherine personally shared Peter I's vast aspirations, his personal engagement with affairs of state, and his discipline and diligence. She read voraciously in the best European authorities, and also sought their direct advice. She wrote and drafted endlessly: her personal archive is larger than that of all the other Imperial rulers put together. But she was subject also to some of Peter's limitations. Her legislation was important and in large part successful, but it could also reflect the defects of her personal thinking: both an overly rationalistic style of thought, a reliance on foreign ideas and uncertain prototypes, and a particular and limited understanding of the needs of the communities for whom she legislated.¹⁷ In the larger picture too, Catherine's attempt to create an estate-based society in Russia was archaic: in France and Britain this type of society was already obsolete, or would soon be so.

Russia's Imperial projectors were uniquely able to carry out their plans, because they disposed of a plenitude of political power. In principle there was no one to gainsay them, institutional obstacles were weak, and they were subject only to practical constraints: the pressures of court politics, resource limitation, and the success or failure of their results. This was true not only of Russia's rulers, but of their favoured ministers too: the personal projects of confidants or favourites were readily put into effect or into production – the new artillery mortar championed by Peter Shuvalov under Elizabeth, for example, or Ivan Betskoi's foundling homes under Catherine. The greatest, or the most egregious, of the eighteenth-century favourites was Grigorii Potëmkin, who from 1774 to 1791 ruled over a vast fief in the southern Ukraine, more or less as an autocrat in his own right.¹⁸ The name given to Russia's southern borderlands in 1764, before Potëmkin took control of them, was New Russia, which promised another new creation, and the rhetoric surrounding it could use the same Edenic discourse which Peter had applied to St Petersburg. Potëmkin combined the visions of a projector with essential tasks of construction and administration. His wide-ranging activities in populating, organising and developing the southern Ukraine were a crucial part of Russian foreign policy in the period. He had first of all to make the area secure against the Ottomans, to make it productive and develop its military potential. On the other hand his work also represented a deliberate attempt to create a model of Enlightened governance, and a showcase for Russian glory. The third dimension to Potëmkin's undertaking was court politics, the celebration and reinforcing of his unique personal relationship with the Empress — in all

¹⁶ *Imeniny gospozhi Vorchalkinoi*: the bankrupt, project-mongering merchant Nekopeikov.

¹⁷ This is well seen, for example, in her creation of numerous new towns in 1775, by the stroke of a pen. Another example is the 1785 Charters to the Nobility and the Towns, which defined those groups for the next century to come, and the draft charter to the state peasants drawn up at the same time. While the Nobles' Charter largely corresponded to noble aspirations as expressed in the 1767 Legislative Commission, Catherine's ideas in the other two documents had only limited connection to Russian realities as they can be historically reconstructed. The Charter to the Towns reflected the needs and practices of St Petersburg, an entirely atypical city; the peasant charter was modelled on the Urban Statute and seeks in fact, astonishingly, to impose the working practices of guild-based artisans on the state peasant village. See D. Griffiths, ed., 'Catherine II's Three Charters of 1785', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 23:1 (1989).

¹⁸ N. D. Polon'ska-Vasylenko, *The Settlement of the Southern Ukraine (1750-1775)*, New York, 1955 (*Annals of the Ukrainian Academy of Arts and Sciences in the U.S.*, IV-V, Summer-Fall 1955, Special Issue); R. P. Bartlett, *Human Capital: The Settlement of Foreigners in Russia 1762-1804*, Cambridge, 1979, chap. 4.

likelihood Catherine was Potëmkin's secret wife. Potëmkin's projected regional capital of Ekaterinoslav, 'Catherine's Glory', served all three of these goals: it was to provide a southern counterpoint to the northern Petrine city of St Peter, with well-designed buildings, modern economic enterprises, a university, a music academy, and a great Cathedral of the Transfiguration, to rival St Paul's Without the Walls in Rome.¹⁹ The notorious but exaggerated 'Potëmkin villages' were part of this attempt, as real in their intention as Peter I's application of the name 'paradise' to the half-finished building-site that was St Petersburg. When Potëmkin died in 1791 the New Russian project was incomplete, and Ekaterinoslav's scarcely-founded cathedral and university dwindled away to nothing. But that should not distract or detract from the real achievements of the years 1775-1800 in terms of population, infrastructure and economic development, which laid the foundations for Ukraine's security and prosperity in the nineteenth century.

These enthusiasms of Russia's rulers and their minions were shared, as I have already suggested, by many outside Russia. Leibniz's view found many imitators, and during the eighteenth century Russia was flooded by projectors and adventurers of all sorts.²⁰ Some were sought out by the Russian government. In 1721, before the full extent of John Law's French debacle became apparent, Peter I was eager to offer him exceptionally advantageous terms to take charge of economic affairs in Russia.²¹ In 1767 the French Physiocrat theoretician and administrator Le Mercier de la Rivière was summoned to St Petersburg, at the personal order of Catherine II; but he quickly fell from favour when it became clear he thought he was coming to reorganise Russia from top to bottom, 'to raise us onto our hind legs' as the Empress later put it.²²

Other projectors, equally as enthusiastic as Le Mercier about the transformative power of law, came uninvited. One of those who looked to Russia as a land of opportunity in which to realise their plans was Jeremy Bentham, an appropriate case for treatment as the School of Slavonic and East European Studies enters the University College dispensation. Jeremy went out to Russia in 1785 to join his brother Samuel, an engineer, who had preceded him five years before.²³ Soon after Samuel arrived he had been engaged by Potëmkin to work on the latter's vast estate of Krichëv in White Russia, with a view to developing it and introducing rational improvements. When Jeremy came out to join him, Samuel was already well established, and could offer his brother a retreat in which to pursue his jurisprudential writing; Jeremy hoped to present a universal code of laws to Catherine II. Both brothers were in search of patronage which would enable them not only to carry out their ideas, but also to achieve status and authority in the process.

¹⁹ Baehr, *Paradise Myth*; E. I. Druzhinina, *Severnoe Prichernomor'e 1775-1800*, Moscow, 1959, esp. pp. 176-78; M. Raëff, 'In the Imperial manner', in id., ed., *Catherine II. A Profile*, London, 1972, pp. 197-246. The Transfiguration was to be a symbol of the transformations effected by Potëmkin in S. Ukraine.

²⁰ Stroev, *Les aventuriers*, passim; id., 'Les utopistes étrangers à la cour de Catherine II', in: *Catherine II et l'Europe*, ed. A. Davidenkoff, Paris, 1997, pp. 127-36.

²¹ S. M. Troitskii, 'Le "système" de John Law et ses continuateurs russes', in: *La Russie et l'Europe, XVIe-XXe siècles*, Paris-Moscow, 1970, pp. 31-67 (52-53).

²² Letter to Voltaire, 2/13 November 1774, Bestermann D19188. See in general V. A. Bil'basov, 'N.I. Panin i Mers'e de la Riv'er', *Russkaia Starina* 1891, reprinted in his *Istoricheskie Monografii*, 5 vols, St Petersburg, 1901, IV, 1-83; E. Richner, *Le Mercier de la Rivière. Ein Führer der physiokratischen Bewegung in Frankreich*, Zürich, 1931, chap. 6.

²³ Unless otherwise indicated, this account is based on I. R. Christie, *The Bentham's in Russia 1780-1787*, Oxford-Providence, 1993.

In their different fields they were both archetypal projectors. In a letter to William Pitt from Russia in 1787, Samuel wrote: 'Inventions in the mechanical line, of which, such as they are, I have some stock, are my chief amusement here; and the opportunities, which my situation affords me, of carrying them into practice, form one of the principal ties which attach me to this country'; at the same time he offered Pitt his personal involvement, 'the zeal of the projector himself' as an earnest of his commitment, if Pitt should wish to adopt one of his projects in Britain.²⁴

Samuel did in fact devise some very ingenious inventions. One was a 'ship-carriage', an amphibious coach or boat on wheels, designed for crossing rivers and lakes (a serious problem in Russia); according to Bentham, it did good service during his Siberian travels.²⁵ At Krichëv he produced what he and Jeremy called a 'Serpentine' or 'Vermicular barge', a fast river vessel made of an articulated train of barges propelled by oars,²⁶ which was put into effective use on the Dnieper. But the most famous of these inventions was the Panopticon or inspection house. Just what vast visions this extraordinary project conjured in the Bentham brothers' minds can be gathered from the summary of it which Jeremy offered to the British public in his *Panopticon Letters* of 1787:

What would you say, if by the gradual adoption and diversified application of this single principle, you should see a new scene of things spread itself over the face of civilised society? – morals reformed, health preserved, industry invigorated, instruction diffused, public burthens lightened, economy seated upon a rock, the gordian knot of the poor laws not cut but untied – all by a simple idea in architecture?²⁷

Here is a really universal panacea, something beyond even Peter the Great's imagining!

It is worth pausing to look at the circumstances which gave rise to this construct, which is commonly associated with Jeremy Bentham. As I said, it was originally conceived not by Jeremy, but by Samuel; and it was conceived in the context of disciplining Samuel's workforce at Krichëv – an entirely local, Russian concern. But it was Jeremy who seized most actively upon its wider possibilities and his *Panopticon Letters*, sent to London from Russia in 1786, developed the concept for a British audience. He was responding to a British advertisement for designs for a new house of correction, and also to news from England that penal transportation to the colonies was to start again. Deportation to America had stopped with the American revolt; after a hiatus it resumed, this time to Australia and Botany Bay, and Jeremy wished to propose the Panopticon as a better, domestic, way forward.²⁸ He continued his opposition to the Australian penal colony in

²⁴ *The Bentham Correspondence* (hereafter *BC*), vol. III, Jan. 1781–Oct. 1788, ed. I. R. Christie, London, 1971, p. 535.

²⁵ Samuel Bentham, 'Sketch of a ship-carriage, constructed and used in Siberia', *United Service Journal & Naval & Military Magazine*, 1829/II, pp. 581–86, and separately.

²⁶ *BC* III, 537–44, no. 591: a full description.

²⁷ *Panopticon: or, The Inspection House [...]: In a Series of Letters written in the Year 1787, from Crecheff in White Russia, to a Friend in England*, reprinted in: *Jeremy Bentham: The Panopticon Writings*, ed. M. Božovič, London-New York, 1995, here at p. 95.

²⁸ Janet Semple, *Bentham's Prison. A Study of the Panopticon Penitentiary*, Oxford, 1993, p. 99. Potëmkin himself had also reacted to the British authorities' temporary problems with transportation: he invited the British government to send the convicts to him instead, for settlement in New Russia — a colony which was aborted only by the outraged protests of the

subsequent publications: in his view it was both unconstitutional, excessively costly, and morally harmful, and the Panopticon was a much superior solution to the problem of punishment.²⁹

The Bentham's Panopticon has traditionally been considered precisely in that context, the context of British penology: Jeremy elaborated the idea of a Panopticon penitentiary for a British audience, made it famous, and sought vainly for years to have it built in England. However in a recent study, flawed but provocative, Simon Werrett has gone back to investigate the Panopticon's Russian roots.³⁰ He suggests that it reflected the specific problems facing Samuel and the tasks set him by Potëmkin, at Krichëv, and that it also reflected specifically Russian structures, in particular features of Russian Orthodox church design. Werrett sites the Panopticon within the assumptions and images of contemporary Russian social culture, and relates it to the power relations and perceptions of Russian society. These power relations also made it a practical proposition in Russia. With Potëmkin's vast resources and unconstrained authority behind him, Samuel could expect to carry out a project which, in its later form, encountered insuperable obstacles in the plurality of competing British opinions and interests. At Krichëv Samuel had access to both the money, the labour and the land needed to build the Panopticon, and he was only prevented from doing so by fortuitous circumstances.³¹ (Later, during a mission to Russia in 1805-07, he did build one, by official request of the Russian authorities and Emperor Alexander I, for purposes of education, at Okhta near St Petersburg: a model which was subsequently copied elsewhere in Russia.³²) Thus the Panopticon which preoccupied British penal reformers was an idea conceived in Russian circumstances which was then transferred abroad and became part of British national discourse: the reverse of the usual stereotype, in which Russia is cast as a passive

Russian Ambassador in London (Bartlett, *Human Capital*, p. 128). British embarrassment over its deportation policy, finally solved by the project of peopling Australia with convicts, thus provoked two equally visionary projects in response, from the Russian magnate and his English guest.

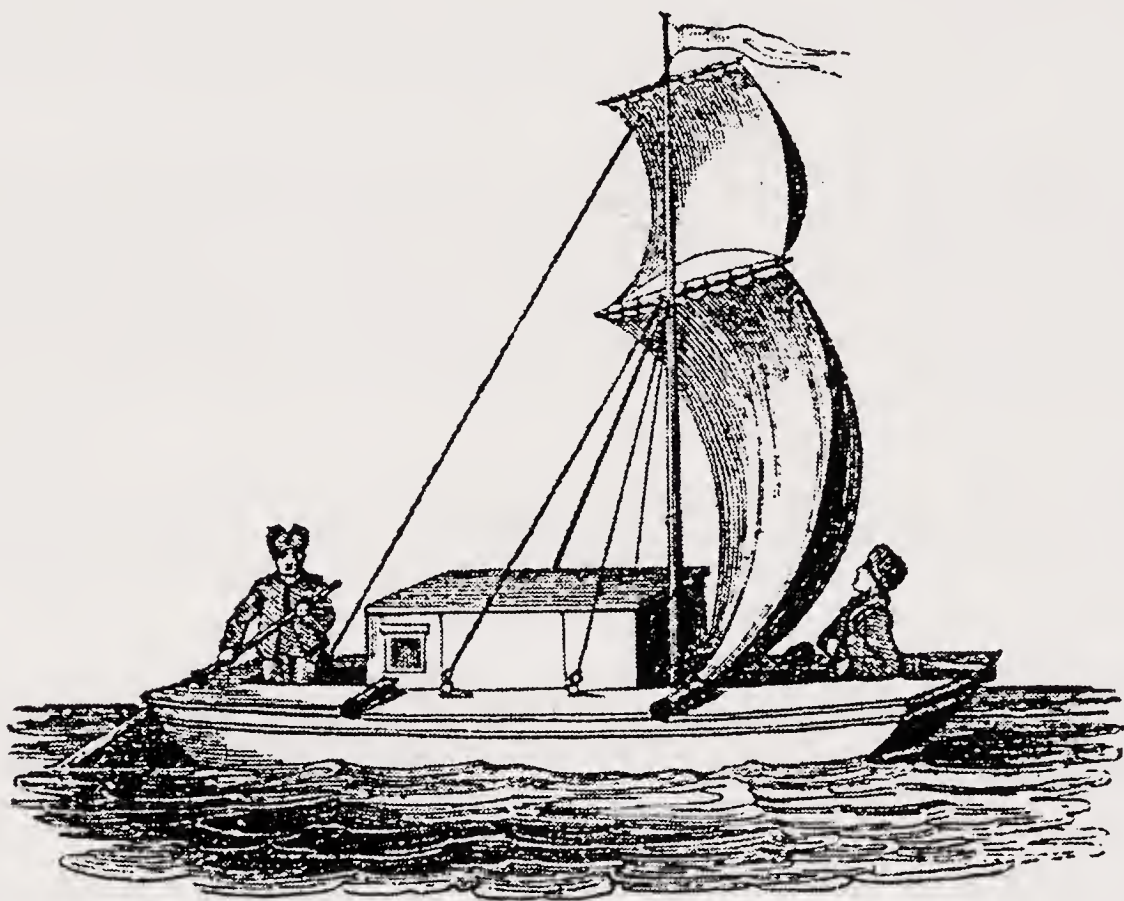
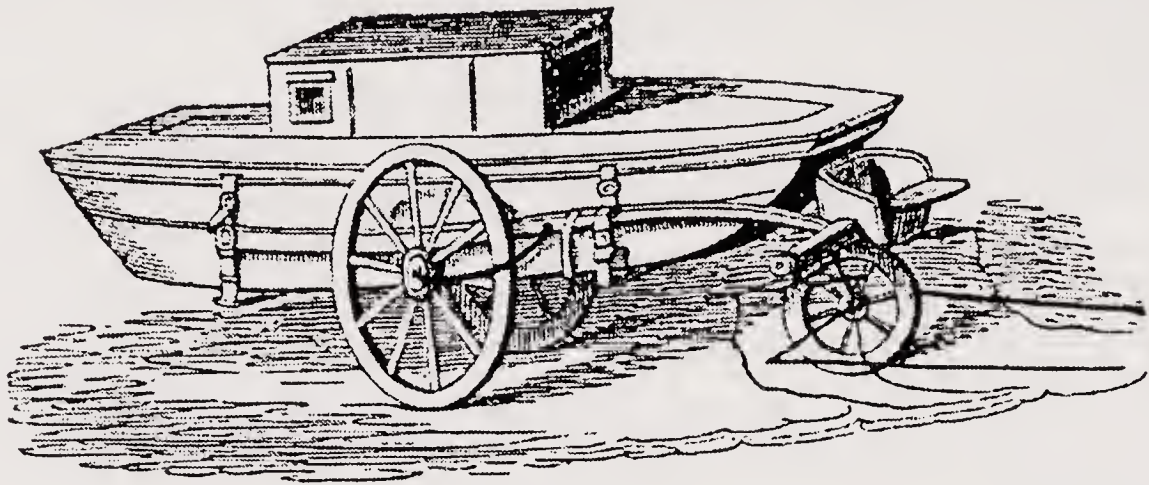
²⁹ *Panopticon versus New South Wales, or The Panopticon Penitentiary system and the penal colonization system compared: containing, 1. Two letters to Lord Pelham [...] comparing the two systems [...], 2. Plea for the constitution, representing the illegalities involved in the penal colonization system. By Jeremy Bentham. Anno 1803 printed: now first published. n.pl. [London], 1812.*

³⁰ S. Werrett, 'Potemkin and the Panopticon: Samuel Bentham and the Architecture of Absolutism in Eighteenth-Century Russia', in: *Filosofskii Vek/The Philosophical Age: Almanac*, 9 (St Petersburg 1999): *The Science of Morality: J. Bentham and Russia*, pp. 106-34; also in *Bentham Newsletter* 2 (1999), <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/werret1.htm>. Werrett works essentially by inference and analogy, and his article contains some significant misreadings; but his approach is richly suggestive.

³¹ Potëmkin sold his estate in 1787, and on the outbreak that same year of war with the Ottomans, Samuel was summoned to a command in the Black Sea fleet. *Panopticon Writings*, p. 33; Christie, p. 178; Werrett, *Filosovskii Vek*, p. 127.

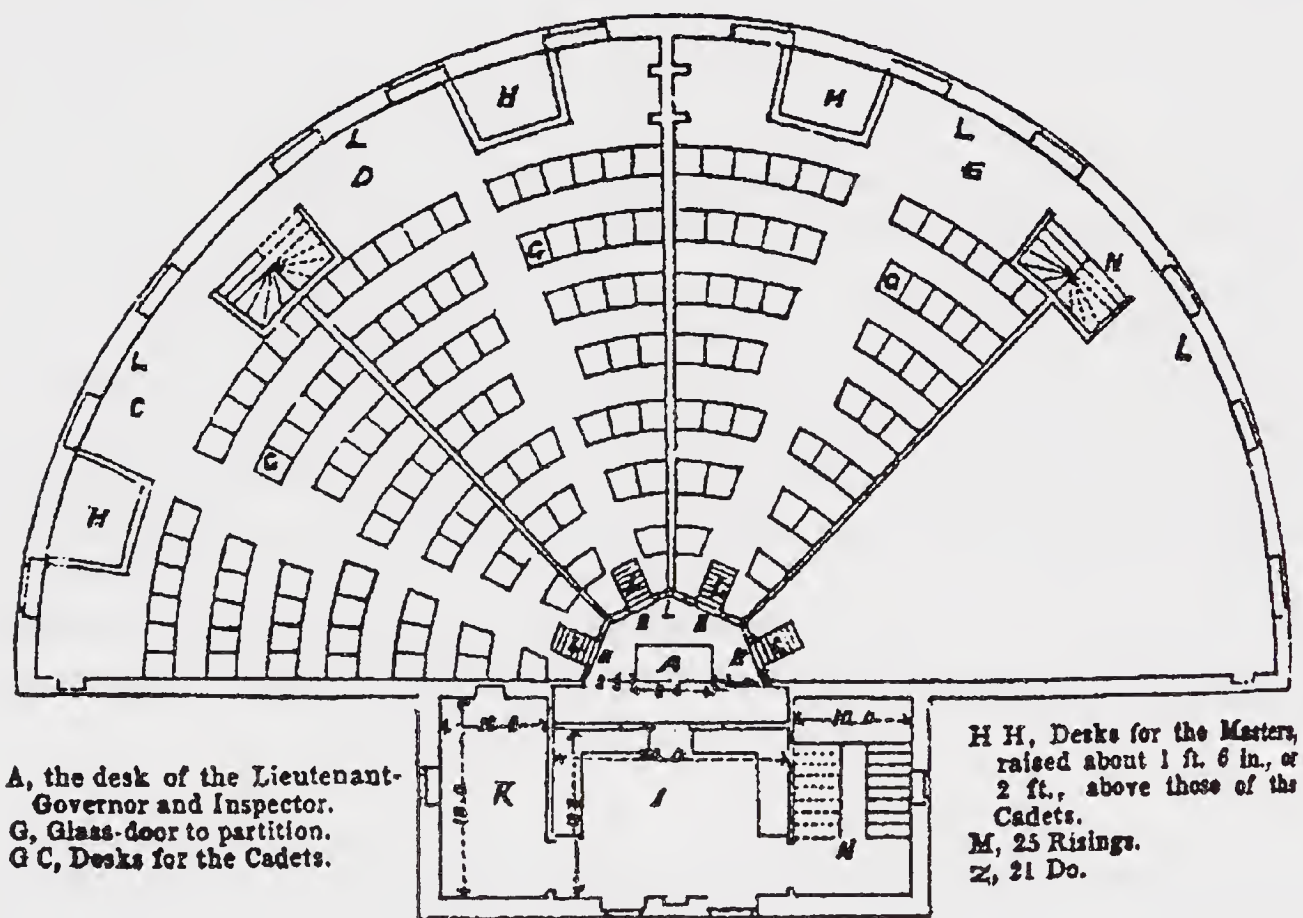
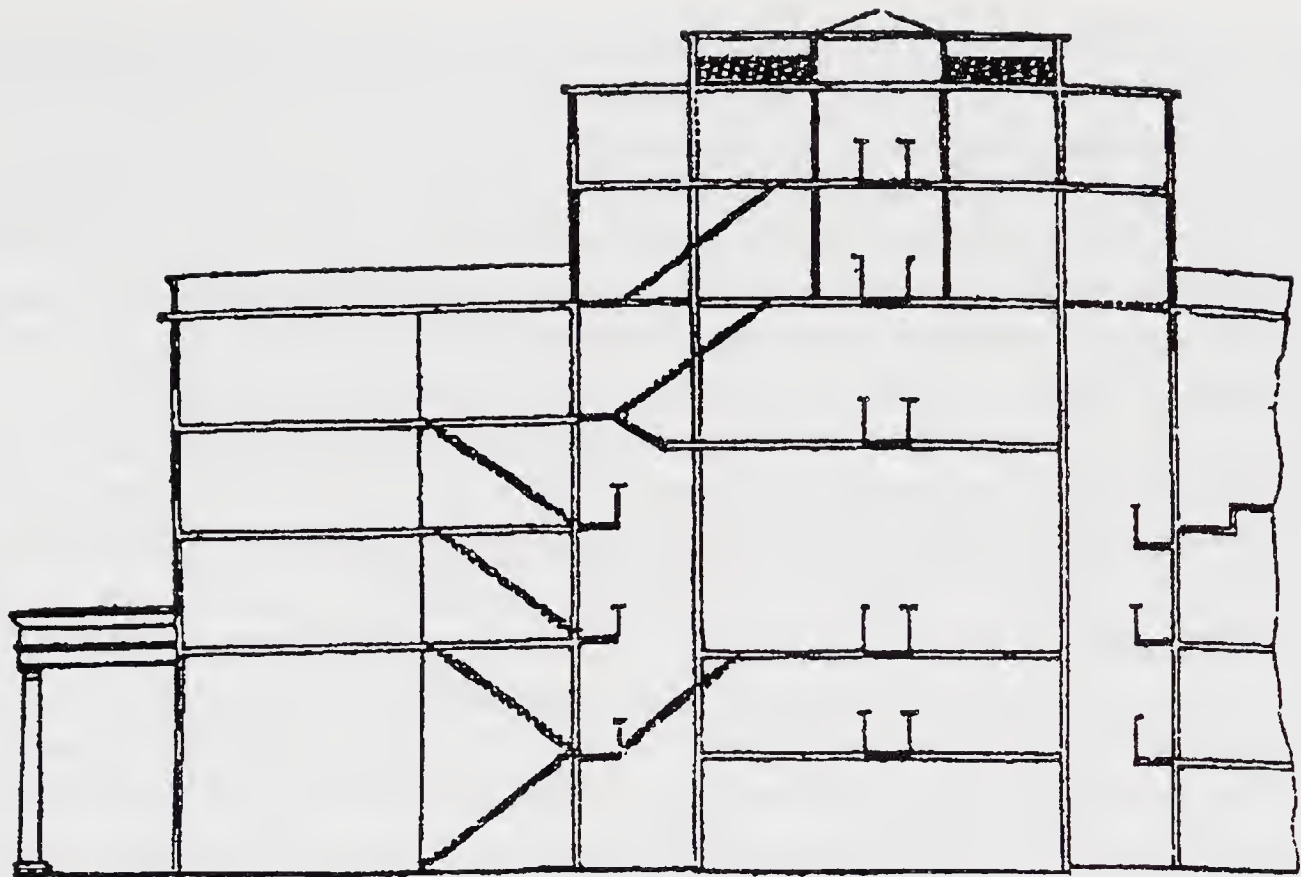
³² M. S. Bentham, *The Life of Brigadier-General Sir Samuel Bentham, K.S.G. [.....]*, London, 1862, pp. 235-47; 'On the Application of the Panopticon or Central Inspection Principle of Construction, invented by Sir Samuel Bentham, to Manufactories and Schools', *Mechanics' Magazine, Museum, Register, Journal and Gazette*, vol. L, no. 1338 (31 March 1849), pp. 294-99 (includes 'Description of the Panopticon at Okhta'); *BC* VII, 303-04, 344, 358, 373, 385, 389; VIII, 217, 224; Werrett, *Filosofskii Vek*, p. 127.

THE SHIP-CARRIAGE REPRESENTED IN ITS SEVERAL FORMS.



Samuel Bentham's "Ship-Carriage".

Source: Samuel Bentham, 'Sketch of a ship-carriage, constructed and used in Siberia', *United Service Journal & Naval & Military Magazine*, 1829/II, pp. 581–86 (581).



The presumed ground-plan and elevation of the Okhta Panopticon.

Source: 'On the Application of the Panopticon or Central Inspection Principle of Construction, invented by Sir Samuel Bentham, to Manufactories and Schools', *Mechanics' Magazine, Museum, Register, Journal and Gazette*, vol. L, no. 1338 (31 March 1849), pp. 294–99 (296). Reproduced by kind permission of the University of London Library, Goldsmiths' Library of Economic Literature.

consumer of Western Enlightenment ideas. It is entirely consistent with Jeremy Bentham's advocacy of the Panopticon, and with his wider views, that Adam Smith's condemnation of projectors in the *Wealth of Nations* provoked him to a strong rebuttal. In his *Defence of Usury*, which was also written at Krichëv, in 1787, just after the *Panopticon Letters*, Bentham addressed Smith personally in the text and contradicted his views, arguing that honest projectors were essential for social and economic innovation, and that such people were quite unjustly maligned: very much Sam Johnson's line in defence of 'peaceable projectors' quoted earlier.³³

So the projector mentality of the Enlightenment found fruitful ground in Russia, in the political culture, the modernizing aspirations and ideological discourse of the Russian court and elite. The new discourse privileged utopian and Edenic images of a new 'paradise', couched though more in Enlightenment terms than in religious or biblical;³⁴ and the power of the autocracy, direct or mediated, made almost all things possible, irrespective of their ultimate worth or practicality. But at the same time, Imperial aspirations and government policy of necessity also reflected Russian realities. Peter I's behaviour and preferences were conditioned not only by his new ideas and experiences, but also by his grounding in Muscovite tradition. He sought to modernise by traditional means and through traditional structures. In search of 'best practice' and state-of-the-art know-how he looked in all directions (including to China, as Leibniz had advised); but the spheres in which Peter borrowed were quite specific. Systematic knowledge, technology, material culture – these areas were unproblematic. Innovation in political or social ideas and structures could be quite another matter. During the Muscovite Grand Embassy's stay in England in 1698 Peter visited Parliament (according to one account, he watched proceedings from the roof, through a sky-light, trying to remain unseen – he hated being stared at).³⁵ But despite his interest in parliamentary business he never thought of adapting parliamentary institutions to his own use; he turned instead to absolutist Sweden and Prussia for institutional and service models. And even here, Russian realities were decisive. For instance, among other things Peter copied (or adapted) the very successful Swedish structure of regional administration; but he omitted the institutions of the free Swedish peasantry which were its essential bottom rung, which had the effect of undermining the system's symmetry and effectiveness.³⁶ The majority of the peasantry in Russia were serfs, and Peter had no thought of changing, rather than regulating, their servile status – in fact their condition became even more constricted under his reign. In both the military and the civil spheres, Peter used the powers he possessed under the old Muscovite autocratic system to impose change and to mobilise the people and resources of

³³ *Defence of Usury*, Letter XIII, 'To Dr Smith, on Projects in Arts & c.', in: *Jeremy Bentham's Economic Writings*, ed. W. Stark, London, 1952, pp. 167-87; Pesciarelli, pp. 533-36; see further J. Crimmins, 'Political Economy and Projectors: Bentham's *Defence of Usury*', in: *Filosofskii Vek* 9, pp. 58-72.

³⁴ Baehr, *Paradise Myth*, passim.

³⁵ Austrian resident minister Hoffmann in London (dispatch dated 15 April), quoted in A. Gaedeke, 'Peter der Grosse in England i. J. 1698', *Im neuen Reich. Wochenschrift für das Leben des deutschen Volkes*, I (Jan.-June), 1872, p. 223; cp. J. Barrow, *The Life of Peter the Great*, 3rd edn, London, n.d., p. 97. I am indebted to Lindsey Hughes for these references.

³⁶ Claes Peterson, *Peter the Great's Administrative and Judicial Reforms: Swedish Antecedents and the Process of Reception*, Stockholm, 1979, pp. 252, 276-77.

Russian society in the service of his projects. Serfdom was a desirable tool in this situation.³⁷

This autocratic power was effective in fields where it had traditionally been applied, and in those where coercive regulation could be brought to bear. In the changing of attitudes and practices, where the collaboration of those concerned was required, it was often much less successful. Institutions were easily set up; mentalities were resistant to innovation. The famous Table of Ranks (1722), for example, filled a gap in the service structure, and offered specific advantages to servicemen: it was accepted by the nobility without great difficulty. By contrast the 1714 law on noble inheritance had a different fate. It was a highly rational measure, and well-designed to meet legitimate state requirements; but it cut across noble testamentary custom and encountered so much opposition that it was abolished as a favour to the nobility in 1730. Again, peasants could be coerced into staying in one place, or into paying the poll tax; but Peter's attempt to change their work habits by introducing the more effective scythe to replace the sickle was a failure. Similar problems faced Peter's successors, down to the far more reflective Catherine II at the other end of the eighteenth century. Catherine, the German princess, a foreigner and outsider, served a harsh apprenticeship in Russian Court politics; she was well aware of the necessity of political skills in making use of her powers as autocrat.³⁸ Her early years on the throne were a learning process about the limits of acceptable innovation and change. Her philosophical intentions and reforming zeal, which were genuine but had complex motives, were channelled by her vivid sense of political reality and by the fundamental facts of the Russian polity in her reign: this was an overwhelmingly rural society structured around noble dominance both in the government apparatus and in the countryside.

These facts largely determined what was, and what was not, possible. Thus Betskoi's educational projects and Foundling Homes were brought into being by Imperial fiat: the Empress responded to the 'philosophical' proposals of a favourite which also answered her own fashionable interests in population, education and welfare. These ideas were politically uncontroversial. The Foundling Houses, it is true, killed so many foundlings through disease that their utility in preserving otherwise unwanted babies was quite problematic: August Schlözer considered them very damaging for this reason, and he placed Betskoi pejoratively first among the Russian projectors of his time.³⁹ The Foundling Houses nevertheless were preserved and maintained by the support of the Crown.

Catherine's own project of improving the social and economic status of the peasantry was another matter. By the time of her accession in 1762 the increase of population and the development of agriculture had become modish preoccupations throughout Europe,

³⁷ Peter's behaviour in the spheres of ceremonial and personal relations also suggests a very unreflecting acceptance of the prerogatives of autocratic power. Thus when he travelled incognito, to escape the constraints of irksome protocol, he nevertheless demanded that his royal quality be acknowledged; his personal habits were frugal, and sometimes coarse, but he demanded that his nobles learn new refined manners and spend heavily on prescribed dress, houses, education and entertainment.

³⁸ Cp. I. de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine II*, London, 1981, p. 580.

³⁹ On Betskoi and his work (and Schlözer) see P. M. Maikov, *Ivan Ivanovich Betskoi. Opyt biografii*, St. Petersburg, 1904; M. M. Shcherbatov, *On the Corruption of Morals in Russia*, ed. A. Lentin, Cambridge, 1969, pp. 241-43; D. Ransel, *Mothers of Misery: Child Abandonment in Russia*, Princeton, 1988.

and with them the fate of the peasant masses was attracting far more attention than it had at the beginning of the century, both among European public opinion and in Russian educated circles. As a young liberal-minded Grand Duchess Catherine had written private notes to herself about major issues of policy, and one had addressed the question of peasant unfreedom, of which she disapproved. Then she had solved the problem of serfdom, on paper, in the twinkling of an eye, in best projector fashion: whenever a landlord sells his estate, she wrote, declare its peasants free: over the years almost all estates change hands – ‘et voilà le peuple libre’.⁴⁰ When she came to the throne, she was more circumspect; and in fact her plans to improve the lot of the peasantry, which she pursued with determination but deliberate caution at the start of her reign, had to be given up when she realised that she faced massive elite opposition and that, as she put it, ‘not twenty people at Court’⁴¹ thought about the problem as she did. The Pugachëv revolt of 1773-75, when huge Cossack and peasant insurgency undermined law and order and seemed to threaten the entire social structure, was merely the final straw.

So changing the status of the peasantry within society was difficult; but problems of change within the peasantry, among peasants themselves, were equally intractable. Catherine set out to be not only a model ruler, but a model landowner, too – she wanted her own estates to be an example to others. But her zeal for rational improvement brought her into sharp conflict with the peasants who lived on them.⁴² It has to be remembered that in the eighteenth century Russia’s was an overwhelmingly peasant society, more so even than the rest of pre-industrial Europe; peasantry comprised over 90% of the country’s population. The educated elites whose activities and culture traditionally engage so much of scholars’ attention – and mine, too, in this lecture up to this point – the elites were a wafer-thin layer atop the life and village culture of peasant Russia. Peasant society, in Russia as elsewhere, was a world of its own, shaped by its own concerns and its own dynamics, with its own village politics, hierarchies and interest groups. The interaction of this world with outsiders – officials and officers, landlords and estate stewards – was rarely as simple as historians of educated society have often supposed: it is merely difficult to document. Like the nobility, peasant society too had the capacity to elude or to distort prescriptive regulation from without, and serfdom only worked because peasants had come to accept it.⁴³ Village elites often had a vested interest in maintaining servile relations, because these guaranteed their own dominance in the village; and in doing so they adopted behavioural strategies which best served their own interests. They might collude with their owners or higher authority; on the other hand, on the ground in the village, they could succeed in limiting or frustrating the

⁴⁰ *Sbornik Imperatorskogo Russkogo Istoricheskogo Obshchestva*, VII (St. Petersburg, 1871), 84.

⁴¹ *Zapiski Imperatritsy Ekateriny Vtoroi*, St Petersburg, 1907, p. 175.

⁴² R. P. Bartlett, ‘J. J. Sievers and the Russian Peasantry under Catherine II’, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 32 (1984), 16-33 (31-32).

⁴³ On the peasantry: G. Yaney, *The Systematisation of Russian Government. Social Evolution in the Domestic Administration of Imperial Russia 1711-1905*, Urbana-London, 1973; S. L. Hoch, *Serfdom and Social Control in Russia. Petrovskoe, a Village in Tambov*, Chicago-London, 1986; E. Melton, ‘Enlightened seignorialism and its dilemmas in serf Russia’, *Journal of Modern History*, 62 (1990), 657-708; id., ‘The Russian Peasantries, 1450-1860’, in T. Fox, ed., *The Peasantries of Europe From the Fourteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries*, London-N.Y., 1998, pp. 227-68; D. Moon, *The Russian Peasantry 1600-1930. The World the Peasants Made*, London, 1999.

wishes of their masters. In Russia the landowner on his estate was an autocrat in miniature; but Enlightened projectors among the land-owning nobility who wished to improve their estates and raise their incomes by imposing rational innovations ran up against peasant evasion, sabotage, misinformation and refusal, which sometimes developed into outright resistance. This was a syndrome not unique to Imperial Russia, but was to be found among the administrators and administered of many peasant societies. In such situations Russian landlords could use coercion and force, almost without legal limit, but it was often counter-productive, undermining the prosperity of their own villages; likewise, landlords could attempt to coopt village elites, to gain their cooperation, but this reinforced the elites' position in the village and merely gave them further scope to pursue their own sectional interests. Catherine exiled the ring-leaders of her recalcitrant peasants to Siberia: but before long she found that it was in fact more useful to allow them to return home again.

This was one of the paradoxes of so-called Enlightened Absolutism in Russia, whether exercised by monarchs over their subjects, or nobles over their peasants. Absolute power and rational insights theoretically allowed improvement of current deficiencies without limit. The European philosophical and political culture of the eighteenth century was extremely favourable to optimistic mechanical planning and social engineering. It seemed that new Edens could be founded, and social ills resolved. In practice entrenched social structures, the power of custom, and the divergent or conflicting interests of those affected, all tended to undermine the rulers' capacity for effective action. The pursuit of Sam Johnson's 'wild schemes', reform imposed from the top down, 'progress through coercion' as Evgenii Anisimov has called it,⁴⁴ 'repressive modernisation' in Edgar Melton's term⁴⁵ – all these might produce notable results in the short term, as Peter's achievements in particular show. But in the long run they constrained and distorted social development. Imperial and elite projects pursued in Russia took scant account of the wishes of people of lower status. Russian elites both used the peasantry and were themselves constrained by the dynamics of peasant society, but they neither had meaningful communication with it, nor accorded peasants a place within what might now be called civil society – a strategy to be expected of the eighteenth century but which ultimately, in 1917, proved to have been a fatal mistake. Bentham's Panopticon was not in fact as sinister in its implications as Michel Foucault famously claimed (in his *Discipline and Punish* [*Surveiller et punir*]);⁴⁶ but it did represent essentially a mechanism of control from above, designed to constrain and harness those supervised to productive activity.

Samuel Johnson in his *Adventurer* had praised, you recall, that peaceable 'species of projector [...] whose ends are generally laudable, and whose labours are innocent'. In their own time Peter and Catherine were often viewed from this perspective too, with admiration, as law-givers and great administrators. Their admirers wrote books entitled *Russia Changed*, and *Russia Changed Anew*.⁴⁷ But this transformed Russia was the

⁴⁴ E. V. Anisimov, *The Reforms of Peter the Great: Progress through Coercion in Russia*, Armonk-London, 1993.

⁴⁵ Melton, 'Enlightened seignorialism'.

⁴⁶ M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison*, Paris, 1975.

⁴⁷ F. C. Weber, *Das veränderte Russland*[...], Frankfurt, 1721 et seq.; N. Haigold [A. L. Schlözer], *Neuverändertes Russland, oder Leben Catharinae der Zweyten, Kayserinn von Russland* [...], Riga, 1767.

product of new projects imposed upon traditional foundations; and this was a lasting feature of tsarist thinking and government.⁴⁸ The Russian Empire rose to Great Power status, and developed an ultimately brilliant European culture, on the back of Muscovite serfdom and autocratic power. These allowed its rulers to attempt whatever projects of social and economic engineering they wished, and to develop pre-industrial Russia's military and economic potential to unprecedented levels. The conditions of Russia's long eighteenth century permitted the successful planning and implementation of projects on a grand scale. By 1815 Russia was the premier land power in Europe. But these developments were also critically shaped by the structure and dynamics of Russian society and its peasant foundation. And in the final analysis the autocratic servile system, so successful hitherto, provided no framework for peasant well-being and no framework for long-term prosperity. Peter I, like Catherine II and Alexander I after him, did indeed make his people formidable, as Johnson observed, and was accordingly numbered by fame among the Demi-Gods: in the eighteenth century he became for many, ironically, an iconic symbol of good government in Europe and he remains a constant point of reference in discussions of Russia's identity and evolution. But his legacy proved in the longer term to be ambiguous and controversial. One post-Napoleonic political critic rejected the whole Petrine project with the observation that 'Peter was too much enamoured of his own glory to be completely a patriot. He wanted to enjoy in his own lifetime what could only be the fruit of centuries.'⁴⁹ And 1825 saw the first attempt by members of the elite itself to protest against the system.

In the end, by using the powers of autocracy and serfdom to raise Russia to Great Power status and integrate her into Europe, the eighteenth-century Romanovs proved unwittingly to have sown the seeds of the destruction of their twentieth-century successor. But that is another story.

⁴⁸ The counterpart to Peter's Grand Embassy of 1698, when the outlandish tsar was as much a curiosity to Londoners as Britain and her systems were to him, was the visit of Alexander I to London in 1814. The conqueror of Napoleon came not as the uncouth and unpredictable autocrat of a peripheral power, but as an urbane, polyglot European, whose state had just defeated the greatest military genius of his day. Like Catherine, Alexander was a skilful politician; nevertheless, he shared the projector propensities of his predecessors. Perhaps his most egregious project was the notorious system of military colonies. His thinking on constitutions was in a similar mould. In 1814 he took great interest in the British parliamentary system, like Peter, and he became enthusiastic over the useful role of H. M. Loyal Opposition. He declared that he would introduce a loyal opposition in Russia immediately on his return: Sir Robert Heron commented, "This Emperor is certainly not wise." (J. M. Hartley, "It is the Festival of the Crown and Sceptres": the Diplomatic, Commercial and Domestic Significance of the Visit of Alexander I to England in 1814', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 73 [1995], 246-68 [264-65]). But although Alexander agonised repeatedly, throughout his reign, over monarchical prerogative and over the peasants' status, like his predecessors during the long eighteenth century he relied essentially on the traditional powers and structures of the existing Russian system.

⁴⁹ A. D. Ulybyshev, 'Dream', quoted in M. Raeff, *The Decembrist Movement*, Englewood Cliffs, 1966, p. 64.

